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ABSTRACT

The needs of adult college students (25 years old or older) and support services that could promote achievement and retention of these nontraditional students are considered, based on the literature on current research. Of concern are students enrolled in credit courses at two-year or four-year institutions. Attention is directed to four kinds of needs that should be addressed in order for learning to occur: general understanding, basic skills, self-knowledge, and awareness of the mode of learning desired to achieve one's goals (e.g., self-directed, collaborative modes). Adult students' nonacademic needs have also been addressed in studies. Student personnel workers who design support programs are becoming aware of the unique characteristics and needs of adult students, who are returning to college in record numbers. The literature indicates that adult students who participate in support programs sometimes attain higher academic achievement and retention rates than those not involved in such programs. Additional topics addressed in the literature review include: types of barriers to adult students' participation in higher education, skills possessed by adults who have "learned how to learn," and ways to serve adult students through support groups. (SW)

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UNIVERSITY SUPPORT PROGRAMS,
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT,
AND
RETENTION

BY

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In 1973 adult students comprised 42 percent of the student body at colleges and universities. The number of adults has increased steadily over the years with the number of baby boomers returning to the halls of ivy. Although the student population has changed services to students are still geared toward the traditional, eighteen to twenty-four year olds.

Increased research can inform higher education administrators about the new nontraditional adult student who is twenty-five years of age or older. The adult student has needs unlike their younger counterparts. These needs must be addressed and satisfied if higher education institutions intend to maintain current levels of enrollment and increased retention of adult students. Research on what has been done to provide services to adult students and the effectiveness of those services will serve as guidelines for similar and more productive programs to be developed and implemented.

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Review of the Literature

In order to provide support services to adult students one must understand who the adult student is and what they bring to the learning environment. Adult learners are defined by White (1984) to be age 25 or older, enrolled in credit courses, at accredited 2- or 4- year institutions of higher learning.

Cross (1978) describes adult students as responsive, highly motivated, and exhibit very good attendance habits. These new nontraditional students are forcing colleges and universities to reassess their services to adult students. Adults no longer refuse to admit that they too seek additional knowledge while traditional students are seeking other routes to achieving their goals. A Carnegie Corporation report showed that 3 out of every four adults in the United States are interested in attaining some type of knowledge.

With increased adult attendance new programs are surfacing. It is possible for adults to get college credit for life experiences, credit by testing, and engage in courses for professional or personal enhancement. Adult education helps to solve a situation where there is a need for a problem to be eliminated through the use of training or learning (Cross, 1978).

In 1973 college and university campuses were comprised of students with 42 percent being adults. With the changing world all mankind must have the opportunity to continue to grow and learn in order to adapt to new technology (Carnegie

Commission, 1973).

Colleges and universities must work to eliminate barriers to adult students' participation in higher education. Procedural barriers such as entrance requirements and full-time status requirements should be restructured for adult applicants. Environmental barriers such as limited library access hours may have to be reassessed. Psychological barriers to adult learners are not founded. Research has proven that the ability to learn does not decrease with age. Adult students may find it necessary to relearn study skills that have not been recently utilized. Financial barriers exist in terms of not being available for some adult students. Unlike younger students they do not have parents to support their educational pursuits nor do they qualify for financial assistance. Finding instructors sensitive to adult learners and capable of teaching adult learners can decrease similar institutional barriers (Carnegie Commission, 1973).

Smith (1982) lists the following skills that an adult who has learned how to learn possesses:

- How to take control of his or her own learning.
- How to develop a personal learning plan.
- How to diagnose strengths and weaknesses as a learner.
- How to chart a learning style.
- How to overcome personal blocks to learning.
- The criteria for sound learning objectives.
- The conditions under which adults learn best.
- How to learn from life and everyday experience.
- How to negotiate the educational bureaucracy.
- How to learn from television, radio, and computers.
- How to lead and participate in discussion and problem-solving groups.
- How to get the most from a conference or workshop.
- How to learn from a mentor.
- How to use intuition and dreams for learning.
- How to help others learn more effectively.

The person who has learned how to learn readily copes with the central task and meaningful activity of life: continuing

his or her education.

Learning how to learn can be broken down into three components. The first is the learner's needs which include what the learner must know and be able to perform in order to learn. Second is the learner's style which consist of a personalized list of preferences and tendencies that contribute to that learners ability to receive information. Third is the component of training. Training is an organized activity that contributes to the learners ability to learn (Smith, 1982).

Smith (1982) states that learning how to learn involves possessing, or acquiring, the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in whatever learning situation one encounters.

There are four kinds of needs that should be addressed in order for learning to take place. The first is general understanding. It should be generally understood that the ability to learn tends to increase rather than decrease with age. Adults can become self-directed learners and make the experience more rewarding. Although learning includes anxieties and difficulties the long-term goal is worth the effort. The second need is for basic skills. One must have the ability to read, write, perform arithmetic and listen. Listening and reading are considered important for learning success in addition to the increased need for computer literacy. The third need is self-knowledge. Self-knowledge assists in being aware of one's limitations, strengths, and preferences regarding learning methods, environments, and attitudes. The fourth need is awareness of the mode

of learning one wishes to use to achieve their goals. The self-directed mode requires planning skills, ability to set realistic goals, find resources, choose and implement learning strategies. The collaborative mode utilizes the small group interaction process. Members needs consist of helping skills, knowledge of group process, and ability to lead and participate in a constructive, sensitive manner. The institutional mode is found in colleges and universities. The ultimate goals become credit hours and degrees. These institutions must become more sensitive and aware of adult student needs (Smith, 1982).

Smith (1982) defines learning style as the individual's characteristic ways of processing information, feeling, and behaving in learning situations.

Meers and Gilkison (1985) conducted two studies at the University of North Florida to ascertain information regarding adult needs for academic and personal growth and to increase administrative support for increased adult student enrollment. One study revealed that time, money, family responsibilities, and distance to campus contributed in varying degrees to adult attrition. Other findings such as problems with course work, difficulty meeting admissions requirements, and a desire for more interaction with faculty and advisors can be addressed to improve university conditions. The results suggest ways to increase adult enrollments and retention. They include adequate advising, flexibility in admission procedures, creativeness in planning special programs, credit for life experiences, increased publicity

about programming, and increased contact with counseling and admission offices. The second research study will address instructional procedures but has not been completed. By addressing needs of the older student both university and student will benefit. The student will have increased knowledge and the university will have increased enrollment and revenue.

Spratt (1984) presents the 1981 American College Testing Program pilot test results of the Adult Learner Needs Assessment Survey. The top ten needs were:

1. Developing speaking ability
2. Increasing skills in mathematics
3. Increasing reading speed
4. Improving study skills and habits
5. Learning about job opportunities
6. Learning how to handle pressure
7. Identifying strengths and abilities
8. Learning to take tests better
9. Learning how to make better decisions
10. Learning what jobs are available near home.

Needs were found to correlate with one's specific circumstance. If one needs a baby sitter while in class child care was top priority.

As a result of examining the characteristics and needs of adult students White (1984) recommends the establishment of a support group for adult students. This support group would be a means for adult students to be more involved on campus. Depending on the purpose of the group it can accomplish many tasks. It could be a support group for women, schedule activities for the weekends or evenings, present speakers of interest to the adult student body or work for improved conditions on campus for adult students.

Involvement in such a group will assist adult students in feeling a part of the institution and thereby reducing attrition.

Thon (1984) addresses the fulfillment of adult students' non-academic needs. He points out that adult students are more mature and independent resulting in their minimum use of campus support groups. The data from his study using a stratified random sample of 500 chief student personnel administrators from the population of all four - year institutions of higher education with total enrollments of 300 and more indicates that adults do utilize support programs. The services most provided are counseling and career-related.

Thon (1984) recommends ten steps that can be utilized to more effectively serve adults through support groups.

Those recommendations are:

1. Increase institutional awareness of the presence and needs of older students.
2. Identify a person and/or office as an advocate for adult students.
3. Provide a printed manual for returning students.
4. Upgrade career counseling and placement services for adult students.
5. Improve orientation services for older students.
6. Involve older students in the provision of student services.
7. Involve the families of adult students in some campus activities.
8. Study the possibility of a limited practice of user fees.
9. Remain concerned about young students.
10. Emphasize lifelong learning in student services philosophy and goals.

These recommendations will assist in widening the outreach to more students rather than remain on a narrow road serving only the traditional students.

Research shows many programs have used techniques similar to Thon's recommendations when providing adult support services. These programs have been successful in increasing retention and grade point averages of university students. By providing a job search support group, staff at Iowa State University were able to decrease the feeling of isolation among group members. Group members felt more useful to each other, responding to a need to receive and provide support and assistance to other students (Arp, Holmberg, and Littrell, 1986).

Evidence to endorse the use of support services is found in a five year longitudinal study conducted at the University of Florida by the Director of the Special Services Program (1984). The study showed a 78.5 percent retention rate for program participants during their first two years. Through their fourth year of enrollment 66.5 percent were retained. Of 150 students 61 percent graduated and some went on to graduate and professional schools. Although study participants' grade point averages were not as high as the total student body their GPA's did indicate they were capable of competing academically.

Levin (1986) shows the importance of a support group for Midlife students reentering college. The group becomes a forum for midlife issues and allows clients to anticipate and prepare for life changes that are inevitable. Preparation increases their sense of mastery and their internal locus of control. Group support allows for a renewed opportunity for

personal growth resulting in higher grade point averages than any other group of students.

Increased retention has resulted at the University of Toledo through the use of "Back to School Workshops". The workshops provided referrals, applications, course information, and program descriptions. Of forty-eight participants who were at the University and took part in the workshops over 85% continued their enrollment beyond their first term (Colvin, Mills and Swift, 1986).

The literature supports the research hypothesis by showing adult students who participate in support programs do attain different and sometimes higher academic achievement and retention rates than those who are not involved in such programs. The literature also shows that adults are returning to colleges and universities in record numbers. These non-traditional students have needs other than the needs of traditional students. Those needs must be realized by student personnel workers and addressed in the objectives of support programs. Such objectives should include making the university community - administrators, faculty, and younger students - aware of the unique characteristics of adult students. Programs do exist which are addressing the adult student's needs successfully. Universities with large adult student populations must also tailor services to these students or they will go where such services exist.

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